Sermon for 2nd in Lent Year A

Readings: Genesis 12:1-3; Romans 4:1-5, 13-17; John 3:1-17

i

Paul draws on two of the great heroes of the Jewish faith to make his point that Christian faith is the true fulfilment of the covenant made with Abraham. In our reading today we follow only the Abraham line of Paul’s argument, but he does also mention King David for supporting evidence in the verses overlooked by today’s lectionary. It is like Europhile MPs in Britain claiming Churchill and King Harold of Battle of Hastings fame as proto-types for European integration. It was bound to make the opposition splutter.

As we saw in last week’s lectionary, in Romans chapter 5 Paul makes the point that sin was the reason that people living between Adam and Moses died. It could not have been anything to do with breaking the Law because Moses had not yet received it. In this week’s preceding chapter 4, Paul is making a similar point that it was by faith that people between Adam and Moses – such as Abraham – found salvation. Once again, Abraham’s righteousness must have been nothing to do with the Law of Moses.

So if it was not through the Law that Abraham found righteousness, what was its source? Paul’s assertion is that it was plainly the FAITH of Abraham that was credited to him as righteousness. Salvation came through faith as an act of divine grace.

God was not obligated to Abraham because of deeds performed, or regulations respected, but chose to respond to Abraham’s remarkable faith to leave Haran and go into the unknown, his belief that he could be a father despite his great age, his belief that God would provide when on the mountaintop with Isaac. God’s response to such trust was to count faith as righteousness.

From this analysis of Abraham, Paul goes on to argue that Christians who also live by faith rather than the Law are the true heirs to the promises made to Abraham. Faith is the crucial ingredient because it rests on trusting God to fulfil his promises and based on that trusting relationship extraordinary deeds can be done. It is not the deeds that save, but the trust that makes all things possible.

ii

The essence of Abraham’s faith was to trust God for a future that still lay unknown before him. Abraham had to leave behind the security and prosperity of Haran to go out towards a land he did not yet know, believing he would become a father of a great nation despite his advanced age. Faith was about daring to take action now, in the present moment, based on the promise of God for some future blessing.

Abraham could have stuck with the bird in the hand rather than go for the two in the bush and stayed put in Haran – as his father Terah before him had done.

Paul had to leave behind the fellowship, reputation and social status and personal safety he once knew, as well as leaving his wife behind in all probability, in order to abandon his life as a Pharisee and take the Christian path. He already enjoyed many benefits from his pharisaic faith. It was a wild gamble to throw all of that away on the promise that Jesus offered more but which also included a life of deprivation, danger and uncertainty. Even after his Damascus Road experience, it still took a lot of guts to follow Christ.

Nicodemus faced a similar stark choice.

Nicodemus has to abandon all his previous hopes and theology that being born into the chosen People of God and keeping the Law was his path to eternal life. It is not about such worldly things as being born into a particular group, says Jesus, it’s about being reborn into a totally new life and belonging to a new people. This is a spiritual rebirth that is marked by ‘water and the Spirit’. Christians tend to think of the water of baptism and the gift of the Holy Spirit, but Nicodemus’ first thought would have been to Ezekiel 36:25-27:

I will sprinkle clean water on you and you shall be clean…I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws.

Nicodemus wants to know how such a rebirth is possible and Jesus tells him that he is far from being able to understand such things whilst he is still thinking in such worldly, physical and non-spiritual ways.

Rebirth is possible says Jesus:

* Because the Son of Man has come down from heaven and so can be trusted to know of such things.
* Because the Son of Man will be lifted up – presumably on the cross, in the resurrection and by ascension which will save the people like Moses saved the people from the snakes in desert when he raised the bronze serpent. So will the cross save the people from the threat of evil.
* Because Jesus will give eternal life to those who believe. Eternal life in John is a new quality of life in the here and now, not just personal existence beyond death.

Nicodemus must abandon his former ways and beliefs not because he has been condemned. The emphasis in Jesus’ offer of eternal life is not on condemning the world – be that the ways of Nicodemus or the ways of the Gentiles – but the emphasis is a positive one: Jesus makes the offer of rebirth because God loves the whole world. It is not a matter of condemning past ways, though many things of the Jewish and Gentile past could be justifiably condemned, but the emphasis is on God’s love to save all the people – a promise first made to Abraham.

iii

John tells us that Nicodemus came to see Jesus at night. John uses seasons of the year and weather and times of day with symbolic intent. The darkness of the night is supposed to mirror the darkness of Nicodemus’ spiritual life, being unable to comprehend what Jesus was speaking about.

We all initially come to Jesus in the dark: without faith, lacking understanding, or thinking we already know the answers and so forth.

Nicodemus also came in fear of being seen to break ranks with his fellow Pharisees. In John 12:42 we read of that widespread fear, even among the elite:

Many even among the leaders believed in him. But because of the Pharisees they would not confess their faith for fear they would be put out of the synagogue.

Many of us today continue to approach Jesus with fear of breaking ranks with our own crowd, of stepping out from the group-think as a person of faith. It is tempting to hide from the crowd’s disapproval or mockery, but the cost is so high. Holding back from commitment may save you a barbed comment or two from your friends, but will it save your soul?

Happily, Nicodemus does not stay in the dark nor does he live for the rest of his life constrained by fear of what others may think.

In John 3 he already honours Jesus by calling him a “teacher who has come from God“ – that is no small thing for a Pharisee to say to a carpenter’s son from Galilee. Witnessing some of Jesus’ miracles has led him to this deduction.

Later at the Sanhedrin, Nicodemus speaks up in defence of Jesus, calling for a proper judicial process based on evidence against him (John 7:50-52).

By the time of the crucifixion he has well and truly nailed his colours to the mast when he offers spices for Jesus’ burial in John 19:39.

So it seems fair to deduce that Nicodemus did come to a committed Christian faith. He did travel from darkness into light, from the shadow of night into the dawn of faith.

To do so, he had to give up certain assumptions in the same way as his fellow Pharisee Paul. Firstly, Nicodemus had to give up control. Fulfilling the Law to the exactitude of a Pharisee was a spiritual tour de force, and although we Christians tend to view Pharisees in a negative light, we should still give credit where credit is due. No wonder the people both admired and feared the Pharisees, both at the same time. They were pious to a degree that put everyone else to shame, but with such moral self- righteousness they were unforgiving critics.

Nicodemus must accept that whatever prodigious effort he is prepared to put in, he cannot accomplish salvation for himself any more than he could control the mechanics of his own birth.

Being born again invites you to trust others. Your physical birth was wholly dependent on your mother and father; so too your spiritual rebirth is dependent on Jesus Christ. Can wise, pious, respected Nicodemus allow himself to trust in a carpenter’s son from Galilee? This is the question we all face. Do we lay aside the privileges of birth, education, personality, endeavour and worldly understandings of success to trust that Jesus will truly give us a new life?

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